

TRANSLATING ELIZABETH GASKELL.
SYLVIA, MOLLY, AND THE ITALIAN READERS

Mara Barbuni

My first encounter with Elizabeth Gaskell dates back to 2002, when a dear friend gave me a copy of *North and South* as a Christmas present. I liked the book so much that two years later, at the end of my MA in English studies at the University of Venice (Italy), I decided that I would write my degree thesis on the works of Gaskell.

After long consideration I chose as the subject of my thesis Gaskell's historical novel *Sylvia's Lovers*, because on reading it I was fascinated by its "amphibiousness", its time and space setting, its depiction of the conflict between the individual and the law, and the intense description and exploration of its characters' personalities.

I got my degree in 2005, but after that I simply found myself incapable of giving this beautiful novel up: how could I say goodbye to Sylvia and Charley and leave Monkshaven forever? I thought that the author herself seemed to ask never to forget her story, when in chapter 45 she had the bathing woman tell about "Philip Hepburn and the legend of his fate". When I browsed the catalogues of the Italian libraries and discovered that no Italian edition of the novel existed, I felt that there was a way not to put the book back on its shelf: I would translate it into my language.

I started to translate the novel with no aim to publish it, only as a sort of exercise in style; many years passed; at last, in 2013 I got into contact with a brave independent Italian publishing house which had offered the Italian public the very first edition of *North and South* in our language. The publishing house, based in Città di Castello, near Perugia, is called Jo March (www.jomarch.eu), and is owned and administered by two excellent young women who have decided to devote their lives and skills to the re-discovery of true jewels of the literature in English with the purpose of made them available for the Italian readership. After a long email exchange, Lorenza Ricci, Valeria Mastroianni (the owners of Jo March) and I agreed that the adventure of printing an Italian edition of *Sylvia's Lovers*

must be undertaken and I started to revision and re-elaborate my translation for the publication.

The toughest task was to rework on the dialogues of *Sylvia's Lovers*, especially those involving Sylvia's father, Daniel Robson. His way of speaking and his lengthy tales of sea and whaling (with all its "technical" words) were, I confess, a true challenge for me. Some passages, being full of elisions and misspellings, were just hard for me – a non-native speaker of English – to understand. Here is one example:

"There's three things to be afeared on," said Robson, authoritatively: "there's t' ice, that's bad; there's dirty weather, that's worse; and there's whales theirselves, as is t' worst of all; leastways, they was i' my days; t' darned brutes may ha' larnt better manners sin'. When I were young, they could niver be got to let theirsels be harpooned wi'out flounderin' and makin' play wi' their tales and their fins, till t' say were all in a foam, and t' boats' crews was all o'er wi' spray, which i' them latitudes is a kind o' shower-bath not needed" (ch. 9).

As far as the language is concerned, at the beginning I wanted to render the Yorkshire dialect with one of the variations of Italian – that is, *my* dialect, that of North-Eastern Italy – but in the end I thought it better to use standard Italian, so that the novel could be easily read all through the country. The big question remained, however: how could I let the readers understand that Daniel and the other uneducated characters of the novel spoke a special kind of language, which was extremely important to preserve in order that the story maintained its social and historical peculiarity? I opted for a "down-to-earth" language, avoiding too long or sophisticated words and inserting anacolutha and grammar mistakes.

The difficulties I had with the idea conveyed by the word "press-gang", with the songs, the recipes, and the games mentioned in the novel I resolved by writing some footnotes to help the readers' understanding. I sometimes had to break Gaskell's long sentences by a full point or a semi-colon, to make them more appealing for a modern readership.

I found the translation of the depiction of Monkshaven and its surroundings easy and truly delightful. I read Gaskell's words, I tried to *visualize* the space described and only after *seeing* it I felt confident enough to translate the text into Italian. Indeed, when I visited Whitby in summer 2014 I was astonished at the authenticity of Gaskell's representation of the town: walking up and down the streets, loitering in the Market Place, watching the sea from the hill where the Abbey stands... it was like being inside the story, waiting for Sylvia or Charley to appear at the turn of a path.

The book was issued in May 2014 with the title *Gli innamorati di Sylvia* and an Introduction written by Prof. Francesco Marroni (whom I thank again here). It was presented at the "Salone del Libro di Torino", the most important Italian event in the field of reading and publishing, and was read and reviewed by lots of bloggers. I tried to keep up with their posts and comments and found out that the most frequent impression the readers had after closing *Sylvia's Lovers* was of surprise. They were used to the Gaskell of *North and South* (*Nord e Sud*, which has been selling incredibly well in Italy since its publication in 2011) – the industrial scene, the classical love plot, the happy ending – and the tragic story of Sylvia, so bright at the beginning and so dark in the end, almost deprived of any light of hope, left most of them confounded, some even taken aback.

Sylvia is generally regarded as a difficult character to understand and to identify oneself with. Some readers have judged her weak, weepy, naïve, and superficial; for someone the change of her attitude towards Philip at the end of the book is too quick to be believable. Sylvia is surely not as intelligent as Phillis Holman, or as strong as Molly Gibson, or as proud and fascinating as Margaret Hale: some people have justly argued that her character is so different from the other Gaskell's girls because she is uneducated and because the tragedy which hits her is simply too overwhelming to allow her to mature into an admirable woman. On the other hand, one reader has written on her blog that Sylvia does experience a metamorphosis, so much so that she becomes a symbol of womanhood and in general of humanity, because she suffers desperately, and in her life private stories are inextricably meddled with public History. Often is the strong and incorruptible Hester Rose considered the true heroine of the book; many have highlighted the poignant

complexity of Philip's personality, whereas other readers have stated that this story has no heroes at all.

Even those who have not particularly enjoyed the novel ("It's too sad," "It's difficult to digest," "the ending is frustrating," they wrote) have appreciated its greatness. The representation of the socio-historical and geographical context is universally praised: some followers of my blog, seeing the pictures I had taken in Whitby, declared themselves to be astonished at the accurateness of Gaskell's topographical descriptions. Someone said the characters are so fully explored that each one of them can be a protagonist. The novel has been defined a "compendium of wisdom" and a "manual of life" and *Sylvia's Lovers* has been said to boast all the requirements to be considered a masterpiece. A blogger has written that the characters' feelings are so well depicted that one is "emotionally exhausted" after reading it: Gaskell is an "unforgiving" narrator, because in this book she digs deeply inside the darkest corners of our souls. The review of the novel published on the website of "ANSA" (the leading news agency in Italy) defined it "a story of many plots and many unsaid truths. [...] A story of the humble, where the events are unpredictable and change the people profoundly".

As I said above, in 2011 Jo March issued the first Italian edition of *North and South*, which had – and still has – a huge success. The readers literally fell in love with it and when the dubbed version of the BBC miniseries starring Richard Armitage and Daniela Denby-Ashe, was aired on "LaEffe" (the TV channel owned by Feltrinelli publishing group), the sales of the novel rose dramatically, and so did the interest of the Italian readership for its author. When I opened a website (in Italian) containing some information on Gaskell (www.elizabethgaskell.jimdo.it), the Facebook page related to it reached over 500 "likes" in a very short time.

After the publication of *Gli innamorati di Sylvia* the situation of the Italian editions of Gaskell's novels was this: *Cranford* had been translated in 1950 and 1995 (a new edition appeared in spring 2015), *Mary Barton* in 1996; *Mia cugina Phillis* in 2001; *Vita di Charlotte Brontë* in 2006, *Ruth* in 2011 (a new edition appeared in summer 2015). As far as short stories are concerned, Italian readers could enjoy: the collection *Storie di bimbe, di donne, di*

streghe (1999); “Il castello di Crowley” (2002); “La donna grigia” (1988); the collection containing “Il fantasma nella stanza del giardino”, “La maledizione dei Griffiths” and “Sei settimane a Heppenheim” (1989); a collection bearing the title *Le stanze dei fantasmi* (2014); the essay “Una razza maledetta” (2013); “Il matrimonio di Manchester” (2013, published by Jo March in the collection *La casa sfitta*); “Morton Hall” (2010); “Il gentiluomo” (1964); and the very rare “I fratelli uterini” and “Luigia Leigh”, dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century.

To sum up, the last of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels which remained unavailable in Italian was her very last one, *Wives and Daughters*. The publishers and I were much surprised at discovering that no one seemed to have ever attempted at translating it. Surely the task was appalling: 60 chapters, over 600 pages (Penguin edition), and the risky prospect of offering the readers an unfinished novel. But nothing could stop us from the enterprise: Gaskell’s last work, perhaps her masterpiece, deserved an Italian translation. Were we reckless or courageous? *Ai posteri l’ardua sentenza*¹.

I finished the translation by the end of 2014, after several months of hard work. I found the job a little easier than *Gli innamorati di Sylvia*, due to the greater regularity of the language and the absence of dialects, but I have to admit that sometimes the novel appeared to me never to come to an end!

Besides some details, such as idioms or descriptions of clothes or card games, the most complicated task was to render the English personal pronoun “you”. My impression was that the whole story told in *Wives and Daughters* was sustained by a fragile and precise network of social relationships, the details of which could not be misinterpreted and translated in the wrong way.

Italian has three sets of pronouns to address a person: “tu”, “lei” or “voi”. “Tu” is a sort of “thou”, generally used for family members, friends, and children – or with anyone else, in situations of high emotional involvement (as *Vocabolario Treccani* says). “Lei” is the commonest courtesy form and “voi” (the English “you”) is a courtesy form still used

¹ “Posterity will judge” (quote from Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi*, now an Italian idiom).

only in some regions of Italy. Undoubtedly, most Italian readers – including me – prefer the use of “voi” in the translations of English works of the nineteenth century and before. Recently, the Italian dubbing of BBC *Emma* (starring Romola Garai), in which “lei” was used instead of “voi”, gave rise to several protests by the public. I decided then that in my translation of *Wives and Daughters* the courtesy form would be always “voi”, but I still had some doubts: for what characters and relationships had I to use “voi” and when was instead the familiar/friendly “tu” preferable? After some thought, I decided I would try to balance social status and emotional sphere. Some characters in *Wives and Daughters* are obsessed by etiquette: Mrs. Kirkpatrick-Gibson, Lady Cumnor and Mrs. Hamley certainly are. Others, like the Miss Brownings, Molly, Cynthia, and the Hamley boys, always conduct themselves properly (at least in public). In other cases, the respect of etiquette is very flexible: Mr. Gibson is a “free spirit” and decides his own way of behaving, and Squire Hamley can be very attentive to social rules – because his “family dates from the Heptarchy” (ch. 6) –, but sometimes his passionate soul leads him to disobey them.

Therefore, this is how I acted in my translation: Mrs. Hamley addresses the Squire with “voi”, whereas he uses “tu” with her; similarly, Dr. Gibson addresses his wife with “tu” and is addressed by her with “voi”; Lord and Lady Cumnor address each other with “voi”. Molly and Cynthia are addressed with “tu” by their parents, but they use “tu” with the natural parent and “voi” with the stepparent. Squire Hamley addresses Roger, the younger son, with “tu” and Osborne, the heir, with “voi” (eventually he calls him *sir*); obviously, however, after Osborne dies and Molly tells the Squire the story of his son’s secret marriage, the old man cries: “*Oh, Osborne, Osborne, avresti dovuto dirmelo! [...] Avresti dovuto fidarti del tuo vecchio babbo!*” (the subject of both verbs is “tu”).

The Italian edition of the novel, with the title *Mogli e figlie* and an Introduction by Prof. Marisa Sestito, was issued in May 2015 and presented at the “Salone del Libro di Torino”. It was reviewed by bloggers and social network commentators, most of whom declared that they had been looking forward to reading in Italian the last work of Elizabeth Gaskell. In particular, some of them had seen the BBC miniseries starring Francesca Annis and Justine Waddell and were curious to compare Andrew Davies’s script with the book.

Many appreciated our choice to insert the translation of the *Cornhill* Editor's Note, which explains the end of the story, so that the novel, although unfinished, is not truly "incomplete".

One of the most praised aspects of the book was, like in *Gli innamorati di Sylvia*, its capacity to physically evoke the setting, with colours, smells and sounds which seem to remove the readers from present time and transport them back to the past. Hollingford is defined "Arcadian" and its rural environment is considered the perfect place for harmony to be restored and for human goodness to triumph. All the commentators focus on the centrality of family in the novel. One blogger appreciates Gaskell's "maternal" hand in the description of the relationships between parents and children and husbands and wives. Another praises her talent in representing with ease and delicateness the complexity of the Victorian world, always hovering between glory and misery, economic success and social injustice, scientific progress and the sacredness of traditions. The characters of *Mogli e figlie* are regarded as its highest achievement. The minor ones are said to be "extraordinary", such as Lady Harriet or the Hollingford gossips (who remind many readers of Jane Austen's characters). Mrs. Gibson is defined by someone "a masterpiece", and Cynthia is judged "fascinating", "modern", "wonderful", and according to a blogger she is "one of the best realized characters of Victorian literature". Many readers have confessed that they shed a tear on the scene of Osborne's death and on Molly's sufferings after Roger's leaving for Africa. One blogger declared she had read *Mogli e figlie* in one breath, because "like from *Harry Potter*, I can't tear myself away from Elizabeth Gaskell".

With this article I wanted to demonstrate that in her beloved Italy Elizabeth Gaskell has nowadays many admirers. However, as evident from the reviews and comments I quoted and made reference to, I must underline that no "big" newspapers have publicized this new and important cultural phenomenon. The publishing houses which recently printed the translations of her works are mostly independent ones, and the spread and circulation of Gaskell's stories is almost exclusively due to blogs and social networks.

I think Elizabeth would have liked it.